

# A Hundred Wild Things

A Field Guide to Plants in the  
Greenbelt North Woods



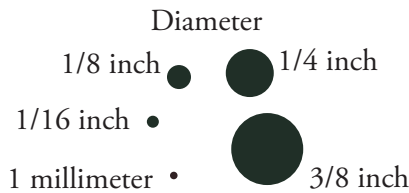
Owen A. Kelley

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Written and published by Owen A. Kelley  
in Greenbelt, Maryland, USA.

The author may be contacted at okelley@gmu.edu  
and at 15 Lakeside Drive, Greenbelt, MD 20770. The  
photos and text are the work of the author. Printed  
in the USA. Front cover and title page: Tulip poplar  
leaf. Inset photos clockwise from upper left are fan  
clubmoss, sweetgum seed pod, wine raspberry branch,  
and flower of flowering dogwood. Back cover: Waxy  
cap mushroom and Indian cucumber root flower.

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**Warning:** When walking in Maryland's forests, take  
precautions against ticks and know how to identify  
poison ivy. Do not pick flowers or otherwise damage  
plants in the Greenbelt Forest Preserve because  
such actions are punishable by fines according to  
City Code. Berries and other parts of plants may  
be poisonous, so do not eat them or let your pet eat  
them. As Rhea Cohen, a Greenbelt environmentalist,  
wrote in 1985: the forest demands respect from those  
who visit it.

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**Dear Reader** — In 2015, the City of Greenbelt hired a consulting company to evaluate the health of the North Woods. I felt ill-prepared to weigh the merits of whatever report the company would produce. Like a number of other Greenbelt residents, I felt fiercely protective of this forest's wild character, so I decided to take a walk in the forest. Many walks. I photographed anything that caught my eye, and I asked for help in identifying what the camera saw. I wanted to share these wild shapes—leaf, bud, flower, and fungus—so I turned my photo collection into the book you are holding.

The North Woods, like the rest of Old Greenbelt, owes its existence to government efforts to reduce suffering during the Great Depression. Roosevelt's New Deal conceived of Greenbelt to demonstrate of the benefits of town planning. It was a whole town engineered to be a healthy place to live. Cooperative ownership was central to the experiment, as was a permanent belt of forest, field, and other green space.

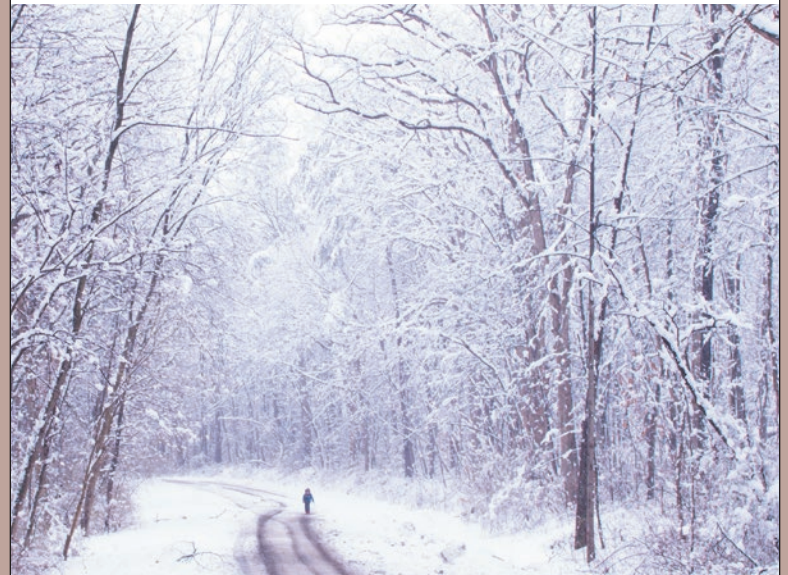
Invoking the New Deal plan for Greenbelt, residents vigorously opposed a 1987 proposal to build houses on what is today the Greenbelt North Woods. Today, the forest's 200 acres are owned either by the City of Greenbelt or by Greenbelt Homes, Inc., the town's housing cooperative. The forest is part of the Greenbelt National Historical Landmark.

Now, the Greenbelt North Woods is caught in a tug of war. Natural processes work to keep the forest healthy and enable the century-old forest to continue maturing. Working against them are the pressures inherent to an inner suburb of Washington DC such as pollution, plants escaping gardens, a deer population ready to explode, and threats of new transportation projects. For now, the North Woods remains a haven for rare orchids, expanses of delicate clubmoss, and a few old trees whose trunks are more than three feet in diameter. May this book be your passport to this wild place.

Opposite: The dirt road along the southern boundary of the Greenbelt North Woods on March 21, 2018.

# 1 Trees

The plants described in this chapter typically grow with a single woody trunk, the hallmark of a tree. The next chapter describes bushes, which typically have multiple trunks emanating from a single rootball.





white oak



8

©AKS

white oak



Trunk of a mature tree, 1/3 life-size (above). Acorn, enlarged (left). Twig with bud and leaf scar, enlarged (right).



9



scarlet oak



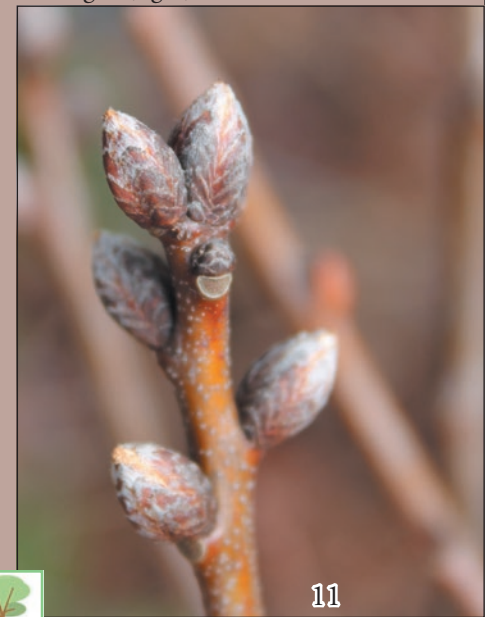
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©AKS

scarlet oak



Trunk of a mature tree, 1/3 life-size (above). Acorn, enlarged (left). Twig with bud and leaf scar, enlarged (right).



11



willow oak



12

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willow oak



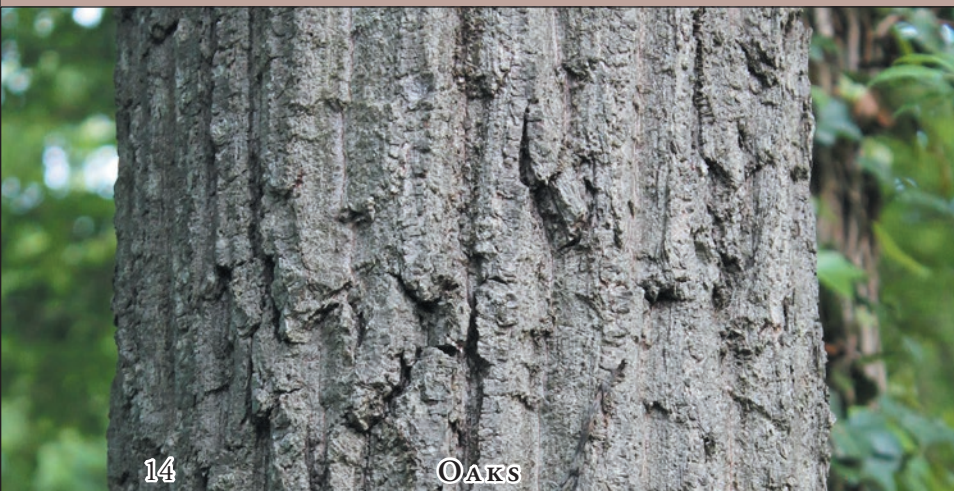
Assorted leaves, life-size (opposite). Seedling (above). Acorn, enlarged (left). Trunk of a mature tree (right).



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chestnut oak



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southern red oak



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black oak



## ◀ Oaks

**white oak** (*Quercus alba*). A white oak leaf has five to ten rounded lobes that extend more than 1/3 of the way to the leaf's central vein. Compared with the browns and grays of many trees' bark, white oak bark appears bleached pale. The bark of a mature white oak may break into narrow, vertical strips along the trunk. These strips are detached on one side and several feet long. White oak acorns have caps that are covered in bumps rather than scales.

**LORE:** White oak has been Maryland's state tree since 1941 (MD State Archives 2019). The most famous white oak in Maryland was the 460-year-old "Wye Oak" that grew in Wye, Maryland. The tree was destroyed by a thunderstorm in 2002 (Wikipedia, Wye Oak). The heartwood of white oak has clogged pores, which allows it to resist rot better than other oak species. For this reason, white oak has been used in shipbuilding since colonial times (Peattie 1948).

**HISTORY:** In the late 1700s and early 1800s, the land parcels were first surveyed in and around the Greenbelt North Woods. In those surveys, white oak was by far the most common "first corner" tree (Alan Virta 2017, private communication).

As of 2017, the Greenbelt North Woods has five white oaks with diameters greater than 36 inches: two southeast of Blueberry Hill along Goddard Branch, two southeast of 8G Plateau Place, and one southeast of 8L Laurel Hill Road along a tributary to Canyon Creek (See map on pg. 241). The age of these giant white oaks is uncertain because trunk diameter is only loosely correlated with age. In the forests of Maryland's coastal plain, trees typically take 2 to 20 years to add an inch to their trunk diameter at chest height. The growth





rate varies with factors such as soil, amount of sun, crowding, tree age, and tree species. The table below lists the largest oak trees near or in the Greenbelt North Woods for which the author been able to count annual growth rings.


**Annual Growth Rings of Selected Oak Trees**

Rings <sup>a</sup>	Diameter <sup>a</sup>	Height <sup>a</sup>	When found
<i>White Oak</i>			
130	32 in.	16 in.	May 2019 <sup>b</sup>
140	34.5 in.	24 in.	Aug. 2017 <sup>c</sup>
156	41 in.	16 in.	Nov. 2019 <sup>d</sup>
<i>Red Oak Group</i>			
133	29.6 in.	10 ft.	March 2018 <sup>e</sup>
145	30-39 in.	12 in.	Nov. 2017 <sup>f</sup>

(a) "Rings" is the number of annual growth rings, "Diameter" is the trunk's diameter at the height that the rings were counted, and "Height" is the height at which the rings were counted. (b) A stump between the Greenbelt museum at 10 Crescent Rd. and the nearby playground. (c) A stump on the northeast shore of Greenbelt Lake (*News Review*, 17 Aug 2017). (d) A stump between the southeast shore of the Greenbelt Lake fore-pond and 38 Lakeside Dr. (e) An increment-borer core taken from a fallen tree, 100 feet south of Northway Rd. at the GHI/City-of-Greenbelt property line. (f) A stump 100 feet south of 8G Plateau Pl. Because this stump was cut so close to the ground, the root flare made it difficult to estimate the diameter.

**scarlet oak** (*Quercus coccinea*). The leaf has about ten, pointed lobes that often extend 3/4 or more of the way to the leaf's central vein. Scarlet oak and white oak are the most common oak species in the Greenbelt North Woods.

**SIMILAR SPECIES:** Unlike black oak (pg. 20) and northern red oak (*Q. rubra*), the leaves of scarlet oak outline negative space between the lobes that curves back on itself like the liberty bell or a horseshoe. This

 shape is depicted on the left side of the adjacent illustration. This shape contrasts with the negative space between the lobes of other oak-species leaves, which is typically U-shaped or V-shaped. Avoid the mistake of confusing scarlet oak with northern red oak by remembering that the lobes of a northern red oak leaf are shallow, usually extending no more than half way to the central leaf vein. Northern red oak is common in the Eastern US, but people familiar with the Greenbelt North Woods believe that northern red oak is rare in or absent here.

**LORE:** Scarlet oak bark is thinner than that of most oaks, so it is more easily damaged by fire (Stein et al. 2003). The leaves in autumn can turn a particularly saturated shade of cranberry red. Once the trunk grows a foot or two in diameter, the bark has flat vertical meandering strips that resemble downhill-skiing trails on a mountainside.

Scarlet oak is a member of the "red oak" group. One easy-to-see characteristic shared by species in the red oak group is that they have leaves with a hair-like spur sticking out of the end of each leaf lobe. In the Greenbelt North Woods, the red oak group is represented by scarlet oak, willow oak, southern red oak, black oak, and blackjack oak (*Quercus marilandica*, not pictured in this book). The other major group is called the "white oak" group, and in the Greenbelt North Woods, it is represented by many white oaks, a few chestnut oaks (see next page), and a few post oaks (*Quercus stellata*, not pictured).

**HISTORY:** The author has counted the growth rings of a few oaks in the red oak group that blew down or were cut down in the Greenbelt North Woods. As stated in the table on the preceding page, two trees in the red oak group had either 133 or 145 annual growth rings (see also pg. 21).



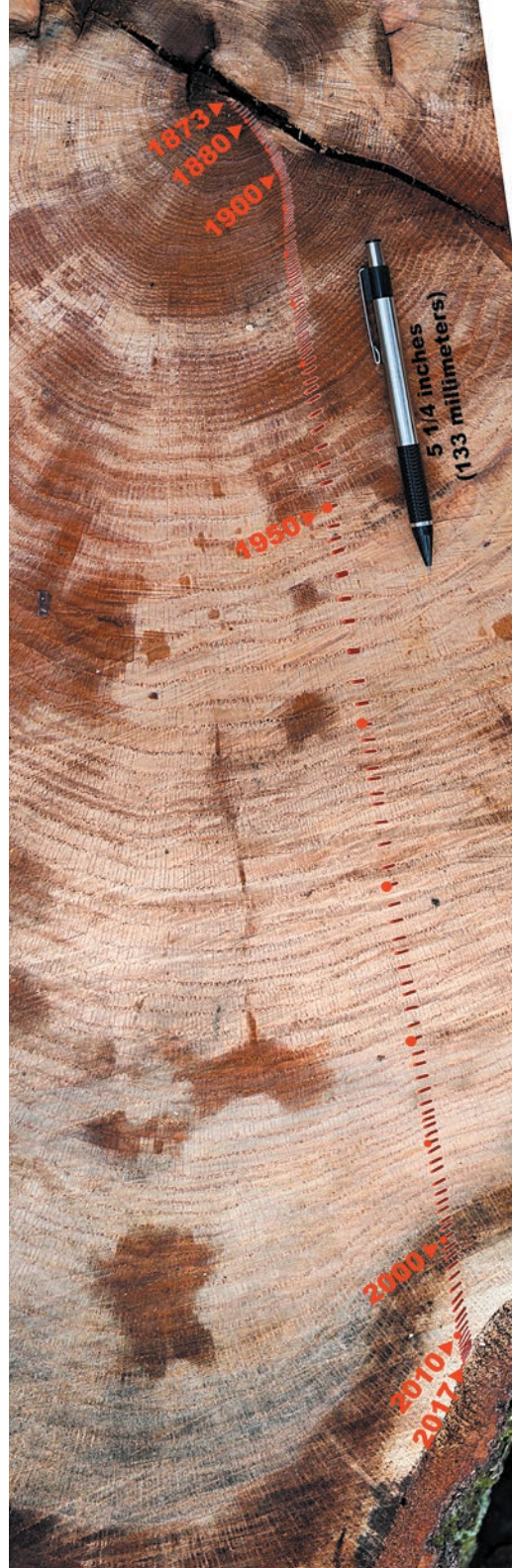


**willow oak** (*Quercus phellos*). The finger-like leaf can be anywhere from 2 to 10 inches long. Willow oak has the smallest acorns of any oak species in the Greenbelt North Woods. They are typically less than 1/2 inch long. Willow oak is common along the Mid-Atlantic Coastal Plain and the Southeast US. It prefers moist soil.

**chestnut oak** (*Quercus montana* preferred over *Quercus prinus*). The leaf has many shallow waves along its edge. Leaf shape is the only way in which the chestnut oak resembles American chestnut (*Castanea dentata*), a tree species that was essentially wiped out in the early 1900s by the chestnut-blight fungus. The bark of chestnut oak is particularly thick and forms deep, vertical ridges that terminate abruptly. **LORE:** Beech (pg. 58) and chinquapin (pg. 59) have similarly shaped leaves: oval with wavy edges.

**southern red oak** (*Quercus falcata*). The tree has a wide variety of leaf shapes, most of them not symmetric about the leaf's central vein. Southern red oak is the oak species in the Greenbelt North Woods with the most asymmetric and variable leaf shape.

**black oak** (*Quercus velutina*). Black oak has by far the largest leaves of any oak species in the Greenbelt North Woods (8–12 inches long). Black oak's bark is darker than that of most other oak species. A black oak acorn can be identified by the scales that cover its cap. These scales stick up slightly from the cap, while the scales of other oak species are flat against the cap (<http://www.efloras.org>, *Quercus velutina*).



The stump that the author discovered in November 2017, recently cut, in the Greenbelt North Woods. The tree was located about 100 feet from the forest edge, east of 8G Plateau Place. From the appearance of the bark and wood, the tree was likely a member of the red oak group. As shown in this photo, the stump had 145 annual growth rings. The number of growth rings suggests that the acorn that produced this tree had sprouted and reached a 1-foot height in 1873. In the vicinity of this tree, there was likely a forest canopy in the year 1873 because oak seedlings have trouble surviving in a meadow or crop field. In 1941, this tree began a growth spurt, which was the same year that the federal government built the townhomes nearby on Plateau Place. Growth slowed around 2008. It is unclear why the tree was cut down in 2017. The stump was cut about 1 foot aboveground. The tree was located on land owned by Greenbelt Homes, Inc. The author attempted to avoid the roof flair when he estimated a stump diameter of 30.3–39.4 inches.



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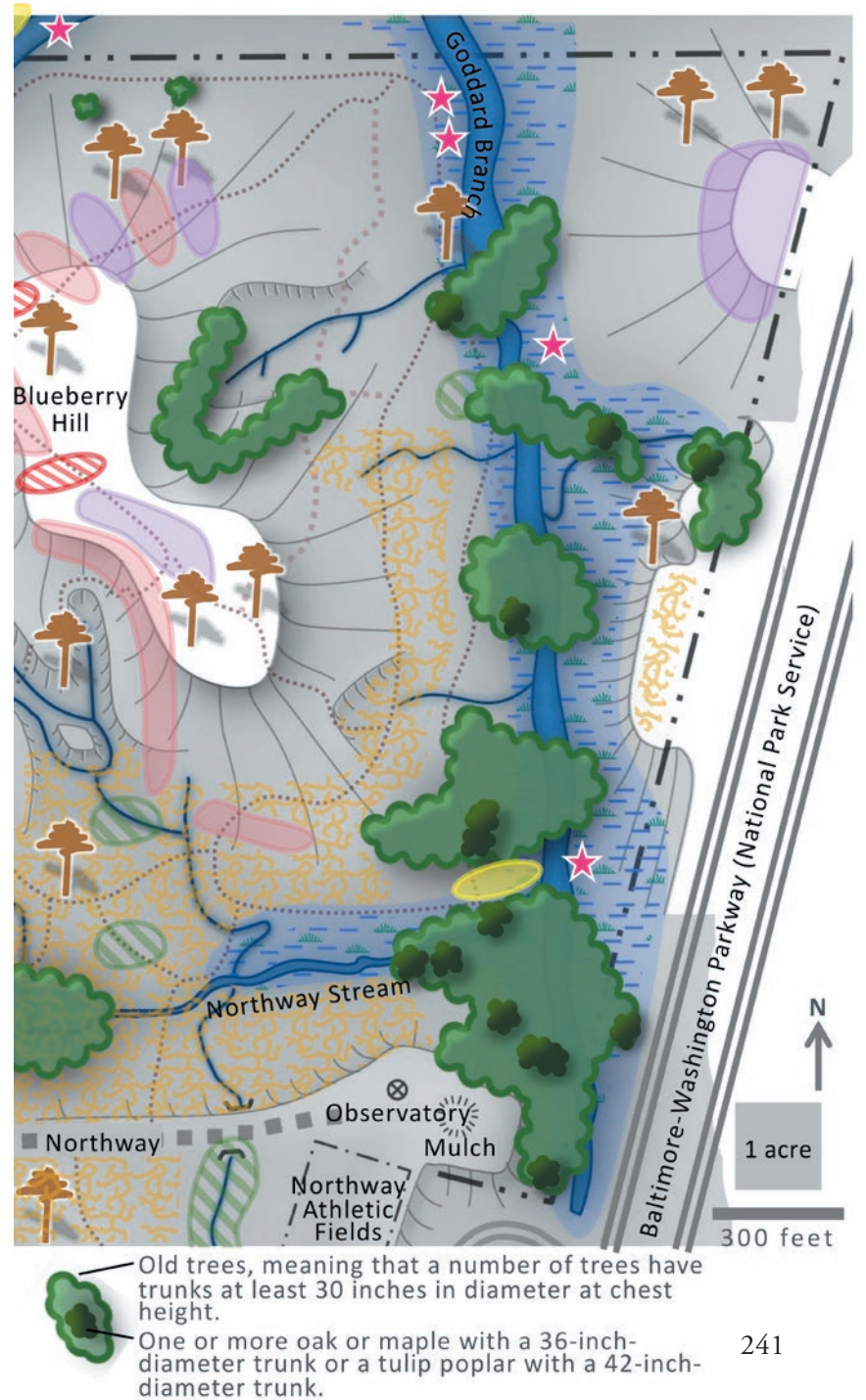
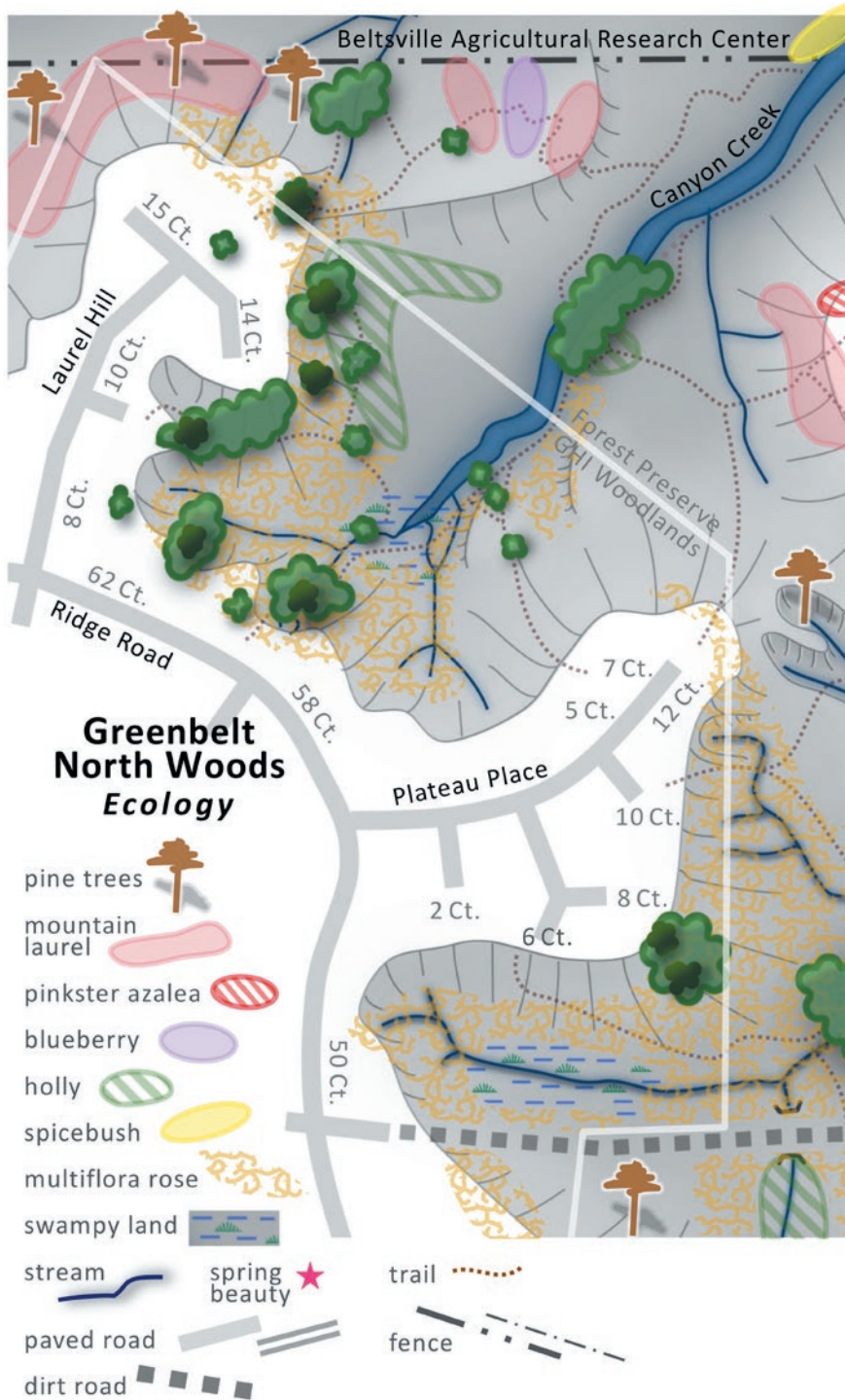
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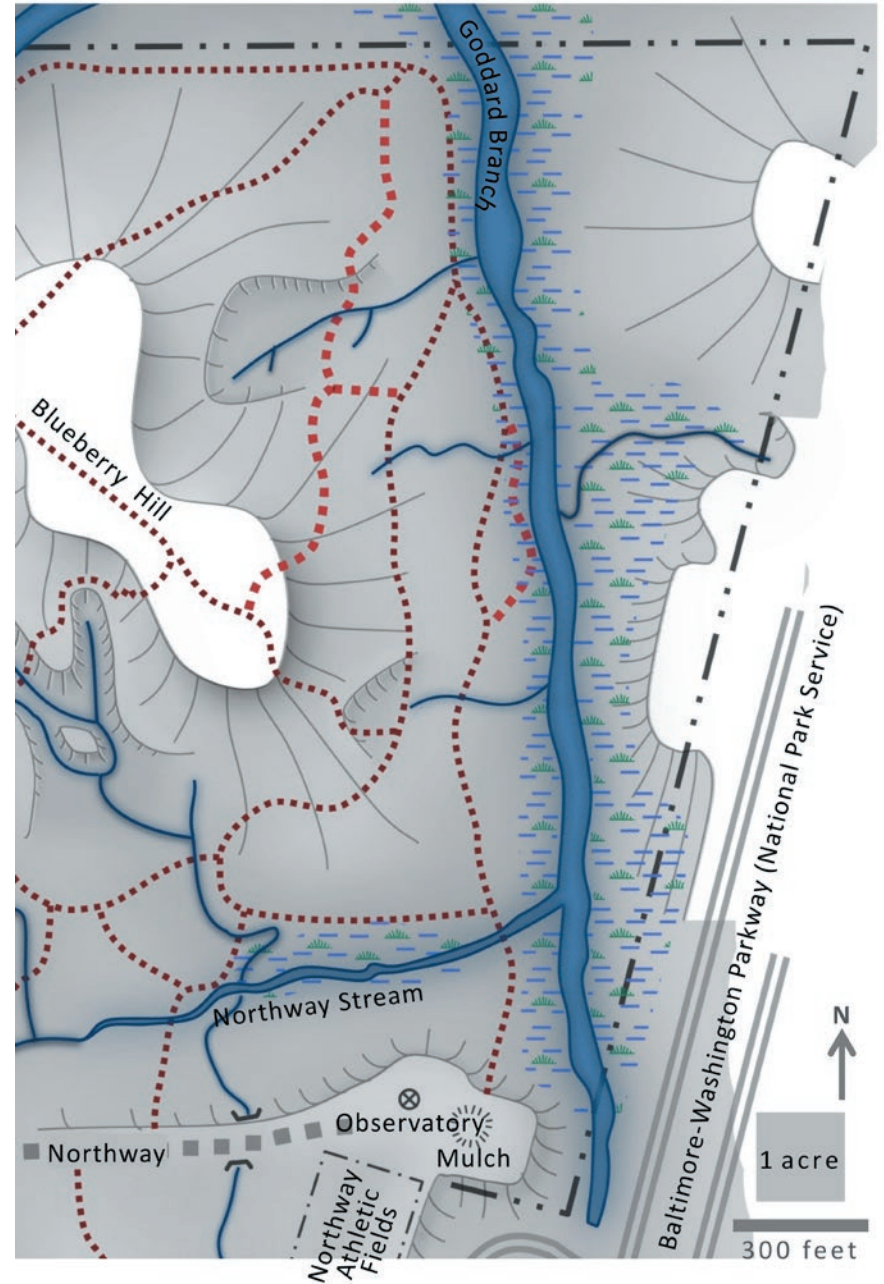
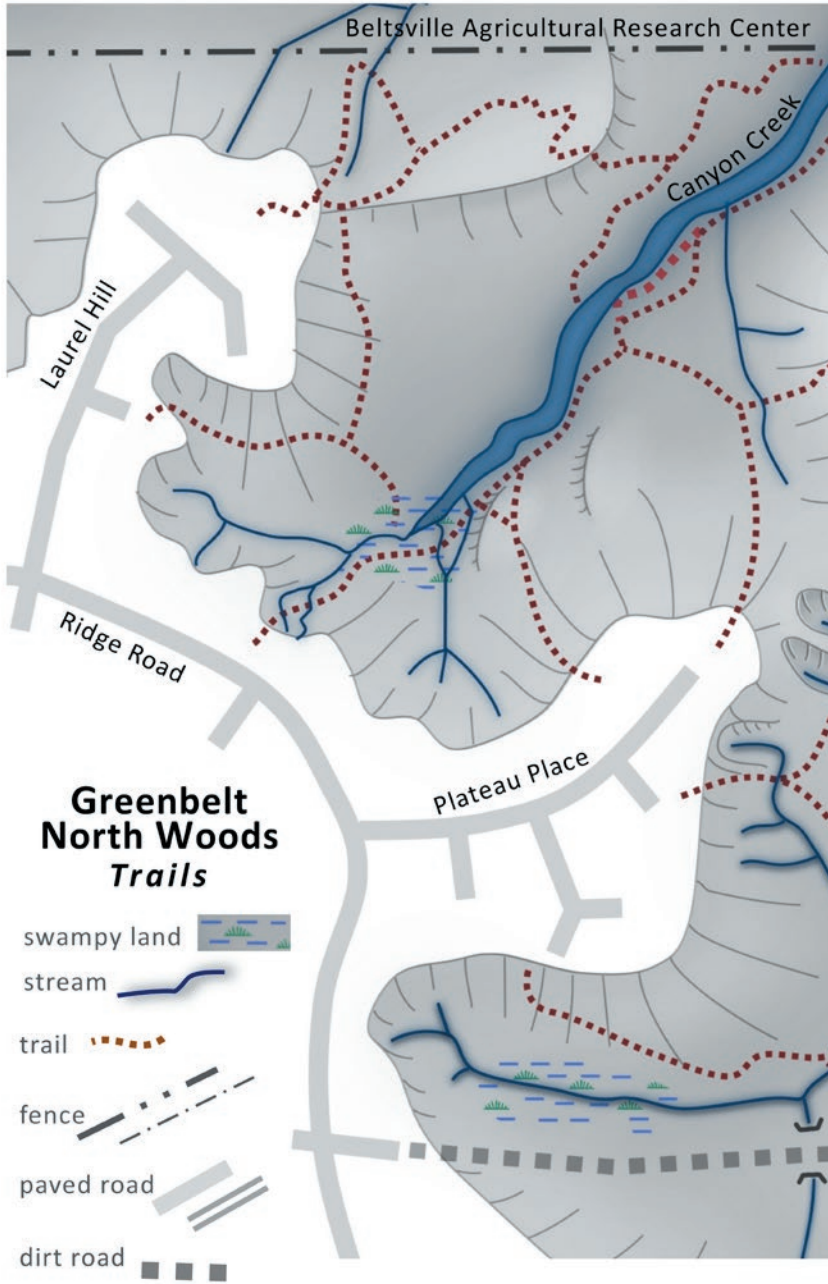
### Additional Species

This field guide is intended as an introduction, and therefore, it does not picture every species growing in the Greenbelt North Woods. The following is a partial list of species that are not pictured in this book but that local naturalists have reported finding in the North Woods. **Trees:** blackjack oak (*Quercus marilandica*), post oak (*Q. stellata*), swamp white oak (*Q. bicolor*), poison sumac (*Toxicodendron vernix*), and red cedar (*Juniperus virginiana*). **Other woody plants:** swamp azalea (*Rhododendron viscosum*), striped wintergreen (*Chimaphila maculata*), and dewberry (*Rubus*). **Herbaceous plants:** green wood orchid (*Platanthera clavellata*), large whorled pogonia (*Isotria verticillata*), white wood aster (*Aster divaricatus*), golden rod (*Solidago*), squawroot (*Conopholis americana*), beech drops (*Epifagus virginiana*), lady fern (*Athyrium*), royal fern (*Osmunda spectabilis*), and maidenhair fern (*Adiantum*). **Fungi:** chicken of the woods (*Laetiporus*).

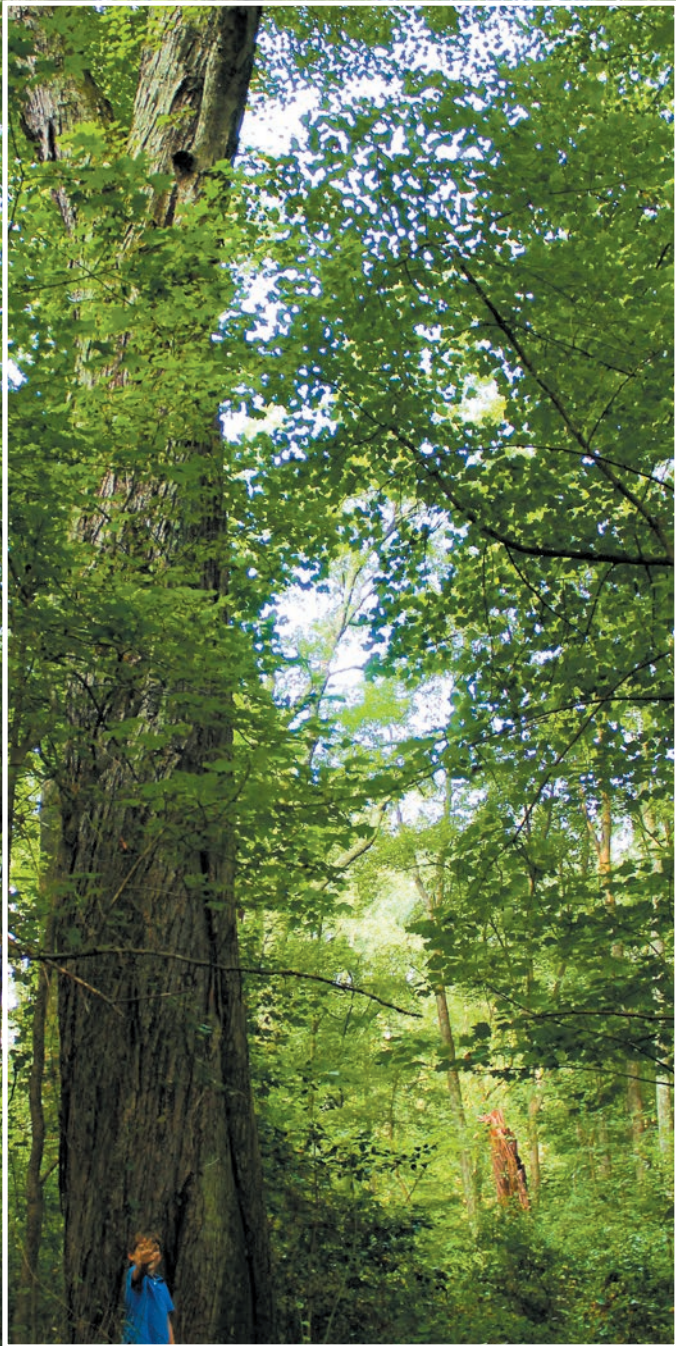












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